

**04/26/21 Monday**

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Abbas Pledges Palestinian Election's Won't Go Ahead Without East Jerusalem Participation  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Famed Palestinian militant leader Marwan Barghouti could mount one of the most serious challenges to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in upcoming elections, after he announced formation of a "Freedom" list alongside Nasser Al Qudwa, a nephew of Yasser Arafat and veteran Palestinian diplomat.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said on Sunday that the upcoming elections would not take place so long as Palestinians in East Jerusalem are unable to vote in them. His comments come amid a resurgence in Palestinian protests in the city as well as in Gaza.

In [January, Abbas announced](#) new legislative elections would be held on May 22 and new presidential elections would follow on July 31 of this year, and would include the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

According to [The New Arab](#), Abbas said Sunday evening at a meeting of the Fatah Central Committee in Ramallah that the roughly 164,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, which Israel has illegally annexed in violation of international law, were not dispensable in the elections, which would be the first such votes since 2006.

"The elections must take place in Jerusalem, our eternal capital, and its people should be allowed to become candidates, vote and take part in campaigns. Anything other than this means returning to the Deal of the Century," a Fatah statement after the meeting said, referring to the widely rejected [peace deal pitched](#) by former US President Donald Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, that reified existing divisions between Israeli-controlled and Palestinian-controlled areas.

Abbas' position isn't exactly new - he's demanded East Jerusalem's inclusion [since November 2019](#), amid negotiations with the Hamas-led unity government in Gaza, which he also said must be included in any future vote. A sharp divide in 2006, after Hamas won elections in Gaza, split the Palestinians into two factions that have yet to bury the hatchet enough for new elections to be held.

While the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority administers some parts of the West Bank, only the outskirts of East Jerusalem remain directly under its tutelage, the rest of the city having been annexed by Israel in 1980 against international law, and thus divided from the rest of the West Bank by the prison wall-like separation barrier built around much of the West Bank by Israel between 2000 and 2014.

Of the roughly 314,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, [only 150,000 live](#) in the outskirts beyond the separation wall, where the PA holds sway. As a result, the election activities of the majority of Palestinian East Jerusalemites can be disrupted by Israel, as it has been in the past and as they have attempted this time as well. Earlier this month, Israeli police arrested three West Bank candidates for Hamas, which Israel considers a terrorist organization.

Israel [has not yet given](#) East Jerusalem participation its approval, although the terms of the 1994 Oslo Peace Accords, which ended the First Intifada uprising, lays out a process for voting at designated post offices. However, the United Nations has expressed its support for their participation.

"It is very important that everyone who is entitled to participate, every Palestinian in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, is able to cast his or her vote," UN spokesperson [Stephane Dujarric said](#) at a Thursday press conference.

[According to AFP](#), about 60 candidates in the elections are from East Jerusalem. According to [one poll conducted](#) last month by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, if the elections had been held that day, a single Fatah list would have carried 43% of the vote, Hamas 30%, with 18% of voters undecided, meaning it's possible neither major party would be able to form a parliamentary majority.

Fatah's decision also comes amid a series of demonstrations in Jerusalem and in Gaza. Last week, [an Israeli mob](#) in Jerusalem attacked Palestinians and anyone judged to have an "Arabic accent," chanting "death to Arabs" and ransacking several homes. Then, just days later, a Palestinian protest saw more than 100 people injured by Israeli police, including 22 people sent to hospitals, according to the [Palestinian Red Crescent](#).

Over the weekend, as many as [700 Gazans demonstrated](#) near one of the checkpoints into Israel after several days of Palestinian militants in [Gaza trading fire](#) with the Israeli Defense Forces. Several [West Bank cities](#) also saw protests aimed at Israeli checkpoints, including in Jenin, Nablus, and Hebron.

While Israel has boasted of some of [the highest official](#) COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world for its citizens, inside of Gaza, which has been besieged by Israel since 2009 and largely cut off from the world, COVID-19 is continuing to rage, with more than 1,000 new cases being reported each day for the last several weeks. [According to aid workers](#), just a few thousand vaccines have been sent to protect a population of more than two million living in one of the most densely-populated areas on Earth.

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Bill Gates Rejects COVID-19 Vaccine Patent Waivers as Shot-Maker India Buckles Under Second Wave

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Pune's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine factory, has helped fill massive orders for AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine CoviShield in Europe and the US. But while rich nations with just 16% of the world's population have gotten roughly 47% of the 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine shots administered, poor nations have gotten just 0.2% of the shots.

The founder of Microsoft and one of the world's wealthiest men, Bill Gates, has dismissed the growing movement to waive intellectual property rights to COVID-19 vaccines, which would allow poorer nations to get their lists of ingredients and produce their own versions. Instead,



they will have to wait in line until wealthier nations protect themselves and pass them the scraps.

In an interview with the UK's [Sky News on Sunday](#), Gates flatly replied "no" when asked if he thought vaccine recipes should be shared.

"There's only so many vaccine factories in the world and people are very serious about the safety of vaccines. And so moving something that had never been done - moving a vaccine, say, from a J&J [Johnson & Johnson] factory into a factory in India - it's novel - it's only because of our grants and expertise that that can happen at all."

Gates continued, saying intellectual property wasn't "the thing holding things back," saying instead the problem was a bottleneck in the factories themselves.

His comments come amid a push by [more than 80 nations](#), led by India and South Africa, to convince the World Trade Organization to waive its Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS) agreement, a deal that since 1995 has severely inhibited the ability of Third World nations to make generic versions of drugs, forcing them to buy from the First World at prices that often high even for people in the US or Europe.

The move is sharply opposed by the US and many other developed nations, as well as the pharmaceutical giants behind COVID-19 vaccines such as Pfizer and Moderna. Gates, too, has a reason for wanting inflexible intellectual property rights, since they have served as the basis for his computer software empire.

The [United Nations has warned](#) that without sufficient help eradicating the virus, COVID-19 could persist in the world's poorest nations until 2024. While some [US lawmakers](#) have urged Biden to support a TRIPS waiver and to lower sanctions against [countries like Venezuela](#) so they can buy vaccines, corporations are positioning themselves to turn COVID-19 vaccines into a new cash cow.

In March, Pfizer CFO Frank D'Amelio [told Wall Street investors](#) the company saw "significant opportunity" to hike prices for its COVID-19 vaccines by as much as 900%, once the US stops being the primary buyer. While his focus was on regular booster shots akin to annual flu shots, the increased price would also apply to other nations looking to procure for their populations as well.

India: Epicenter of Both Virus and Vaccines

Something else Gates said highlighted the ongoing disparities in vaccine distribution around the globe.

"The vaccine's basis has been amazing: not only did we get them very rapidly, now the volumes are getting up and we're using factories in India and in other places as a second source," Gates said. "So we're not just relying on the company that invented the vaccine, but for the first time ever, transferring exactly that vaccine into factories like in Serum or in Bio E [Biological Health, Ltd.] to get the capacity up."

However, it's precisely the place that has been tapped to produce extra vaccines for the First World that is in need of them the most.

As of mid-March, the US government had already [paid for 750 million](#) complete SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, which is three times the US adult population and more than twice its total population of 330 million. US President [Joe Biden said last week](#) that while the US has given more than half its adult population at least one shot, the US was "not yet" ready to begin sharing.

In India, where many of the vaccines are manufactured, a new wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is exploding. On Sunday, 352,991 new cases were recorded, [shattering the world record](#) set just the previous day and a 140% increase over two weeks ago. Deaths are similarly on the rise, with Sunday seeing a 222% increase from two weeks ago to 2,812 deaths, according to data compiled by the [New York Times](#).

Only 10% of Indians - just 140 million out of a population of 1.35 billion - have received even one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, [despite a boast](#) just weeks ago that it was "the fastest country in the world" for administering 100 million doses in few days than the US or China did. Now, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said the federal government will no longer help states buy vaccines.

[Reuters reported](#) on Monday that Modi would instead be supporting domestic vaccine makers by guaranteeing purchases from them - a strategy similar to the United States, which placed orders for hundreds of millions of vaccines before such vaccines even existed. However, if states want to buy foreign vaccines, it will be up to them to do so.

Until now, India has been administering the Anglo-Swedish AstraZeneca CoviShield vaccine and Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech's Covaxin vaccine. A third vaccine, [Russia's Sputnik V](#), was also recently approved for use, the first doses of which are expected to arrive on May 1. Help for the Third World - Once the First is Done

On Sunday, US National Security Council [spokesperson Emily Horne](#) said the US would be giving Bio E raw material sufficient to "ramp up to produce at least 1 billion doses" of the CoviShield vaccine "by the end of 2022." The US also said on Monday that it would [share 60 million doses](#) of the AstraZeneca vaccine with other nations, but it did not say which. The US Food and Drug Administration has not approved the vaccine for use in the US, but the US is still on order for [300 million shots](#), or 150 million full vaccinations.

In his interview, Gates predicted the pandemic would be mostly over by then, because after First World nations finish vaccinating their own populations, they will begin to share their vaccines with the rest of the world.

"We won't have eradicated this disease, but we'll be able to bring it down to very small numbers by the end of 2022," Gates said. "Even this summer, [the US and the UK] will get to high vaccination levels, and that'll free up [more vaccines] so that we're getting them out to the entire world in late 2021 and through 2022."

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom [Ghebreyesus said on April 9](#) that there "remains a shocking imbalance" in global vaccination patterns, noting that "on average in high-income countries, almost one in four people has received a vaccine. In low-income countries, it's one in more than 500." That translates to 47% of all doses being administered in high-income countries, and just 0.2% of all doses going to low-income nations, [according to AFP](#).

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US Space Command Reviewing Space Junk False Alarm Issued to NASA/SpaceX Dragon Capsule Team



by [Evan Craighead](#)

Prior to arriving at the International Space Station on Saturday morning, crew members aboard the SpaceX's Crew Dragon spacecraft 'Endeavour' were instructed to don their spacesuits and secure themselves in preparation for a possible space junk encounter -- also known as a conjunction.

US Space Command (SPACECOM) spokesperson Lt. Col. Erin Dick confirmed on Monday that the [original warning](#) of so-called space junk actually turned out to be a false alarm.

"However, we quickly realized this was a reporting error," she told the [Associated Press](#) via email, "and that there was never a collision threat because there was no object at risk of colliding with the capsule."

It was SPACECOM's 18th Space Control Squadron that initially alerted NASA to the possible encounter on Friday. The false alarm is now under review.

Dick added that further information regarding the "reporting error" would likely be made available later this week.

"Of course, we're always happy to hear that there never was a threat, but we're also glad the procedures were in place and the crew would have been ready if the threat had been real," NASA spokesperson Kelly Humphries said.

Video published by YouTuber Raw Space shows the live mission control reaction to the possible conjunction, which occurred approximately eight hours following the capsule's launch.

Despite the false alarm, the NASA-SpaceX mission ultimately resulted in a successful docking to the ISS, allowing Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronaut Akihiko Hoshide, European Space Agency (ESA) astronaut Thomas Pesquet and NASA astronauts Shane Kimbrough and Megan McArthur, to join their fellow astronauts and cosmonauts.

The SpaceX Crew-2 mission comes as the second of six crewed missions under NASA's Commercial Crew Program.

Members of the SpaceX Crew-1 mission - NASA astronauts Michael Hopkins, Victor Glover, and Shannon Walker and Soichi Noguchi - are scheduled to undock from the ISS and begin their journey back to Earth on Wednesday, April 28.

Prior to the Crew-1 mission team's departure, Walker will turn over command of the station to Hoshide, a Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronaut and Crew-2 mission member.

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Biden Administration Preparing to Send Secretary of State Blinken to Ukraine Next Month - Report

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier on Monday, Russian presidential foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov told a local broadcaster that Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden have discussed tentative dates for a meeting in June.

In addition to Biden's possible European summit with Putin, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is also scheduled to make a trek to Ukraine in May, CNN reported on Monday, citing a Ukrainian government source.

According to the source, negotiations between the United States and Ukraine about Blinken's visit to Kiev in May are ongoing, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also hopes to have a meeting with President Joe Biden ahead of his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

With respect to the potential Biden-Putin summit, the report said it will take place only after Biden's meetings with the leaders of the G7 and NATO partner states.

Ex-US diplomat Daniel Fried told the outlet that he views Blinken's reported trip as "a very good move."

"A proper Ukraine strategy needs two parts," he said. "One arm around their shoulder to help them resist aggression from the Kremlin and a foot on their back to get them to fix things at home."

Fried previously served as US ambassador to Poland from 1997 to 2000, and as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs from 2005 to 2009.

He claimed that this two-pronged approach by Washington would ensure "Ukraine is not simply a corrupt state vulnerable to that Russian aggression."

Earlier this month, Blinken met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Brussels, Belgium, and declared that the US "stands firmly behind the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine."

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who also attended the meeting in Brussels, also pledged to assist the Ukrainian government "with its self-defense needs."

The head of the Pentagon did not explain what material support to Kiev would look like.

These statements came as Russian military personnel were performing snap combat readiness checks in the southern and western military districts of the country. Those drills have [since concluded](#).

Ukraine and the United States have recently voiced concerns over the situation on the border with Russia, including about the alleged Russian military buildup, and urged Moscow to deescalate. Russia said all of its troop movements are aimed at ensuring its national security in response to NATO's buildup near Russia's borders. Russia has also repeatedly said it was not party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

"The US and other NATO member states, which seek increasing its presence at Russia's borders, continue provocative activities in the east and in the Black Sea waters," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria [Zakharova said](#) last week.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that if the Ukrainian president wants to restore relations, then Moscow will welcome such a move. The Russian leader also said that he is ready to host his Ukrainian counterpart in Moscow at any convenient time if he wants to discuss bilateral relations, when commenting on Zelenskyy's recent proposal to meet.

At the same time, the Russian leader added that Kiev raising the issue of relocating Donbas talks from Minsk is "an attempt [to move away](#) from talking about Donbas issue."

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Black Americans Buying More Guns Amid Pandemic Uncertainties, Report Says  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, gun sellers across the US have reported a major spike in firearm and bullet purchases. The rise of uncertainty among US citizens who are now required to sit at home has brought with it the fear of food shortages, government shutdown and many more existential crises.

[According to a report](#) from the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), there has been a nearly 60% increase in firearm sales among Black women and men in 2020 including more than 8 million people who were first time gun-purchasers and an increasing number of women.

"Once COVID hit, that was the line in the sand," said Phillip Smith, founder and president of the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA). "You had to sit there and say, 'Is there going to be a total breakdown of social order? Is there going to be food for my family? Will we have gas? Will everything crumble in our general society and will we literally have to fight people off?'"

NAAGA is a gun rights organization that provides support, training and community for new gun owners. It was founded in 2015 and has 45,000 members nationwide who they believe have an inalienable right to self-defense. The pro-Second Amendment organization has a goal to make sure every African American is introduced to firearm training for home protection, competitive shooting and outdoor recreational activities.

Many new gun owners cite wanting firearm knowledge, confidence and a sense of security as the reason for purchasing a firearm.

"I wanted to be knowledgeable about firearms. I wanted to gain confidence about navigating my personal life, professional life and security," said Janice Dalton in an [interview with CBS](#) about why she purchased a gun and signed up for training. "That sense of security is really important."

[Black gun ownership](#) in the US has been a tradition following the American Civil War, where newly freed Black people formed militias in a move towards self-defense. Many pro-firearm Black gun groups, like the Not F\*\*king Around Coalition (NFAC) have marched peacefully at protests with their guns in hand, demanding justice.

The unveiling of these statistics come during a fierce debate on gun laws in the US following [147 mass shootings](#) and over 200 [shootings by police](#) since the start of the year. Motivation for increased firearm purchases among Black people can also be linked to a need for self-defense after the high-profile cases of vigilante killings of Black men, including the death of [Ahmaud Arbery in 2020](#).

This month US President Joe Biden announced new executive orders on gun control in response to the mass shootings, such as a proposed legislation on "red flag" laws, which would allow a person to be temporarily barred from accessing firearms if they are believed to be a danger to themselves or someone else.

Gun owners like Dalton are not deterred by the mass shootings and continue to believe in the right to bear arms, despite the pushback from some anti-gun supporters.

"They're entitled to their opinions and their value systems. And if they choose to navigate from that perspective, I certainly understand and I'm respectful [sic] of that," said Dalton. "There are

other folks who think that additional layer of confidence, knowledge and empowerment is critically important.”

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New Apple Transparency Update Allows Users to Choose Who Tracks Their Data  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

In today’s tech-savvy world, it has become more convenient to track your data by saving it online. Banking information, location, and personal information have all become a tool for some tech giants like Facebook to tailor advertisements and information to suit the needs of its consumers.

Apple released a new anti-tracking tool for iPhones on Monday as a part of its new Transparency feature, which will require apps to ask for user permission before tracking their information across the web.

The app-tracking Transparency feature is available as part of the iOS 14.5 update as a tool to boost user privacy. In a video released by Apple on Monday, it touts the update as a much-needed boost to user privacy.

The narrator speaks on the benefits of data tracking, but notes that some app-trackers are taking more data than they actually need in order to be beneficial to the user.

“They collect thousands of pieces of information about you to create a digital profile that they sell to others,” the narrator admits, “This has been happening without your knowledge or permission. Your information is for sale. You have [become the product](#).”

The narrator goes on to say that in its new update, Apple will give the user a choice in whether or not they will allow each app on their phone to track their activity. Users will simply be prompted to click “ask app not to track” or “allow” after allowing the update on their phones. This feature was unveiled last summer and expected to be released in September, but was met with many delays over fights against the new tool. Facebook, which receives most of its revenue by selling targeted ads, criticized the update not as a tool of privacy but a tool of profit.

“It will force businesses to turn to subscriptions and other in-app payments for revenue, meaning Apple will profit and many free services will have to start charging or exit the market,” Facebook’s vice president of ads and business products Dan Levy said in a blog post in December.

Facebook and Apple, two of the largest tech companies, have very different business models. Facebook functions off of providing free online services but at the cost of selling user data to corporate subscribers; Apple relies less on selling data and more on charging consumers for exclusive products. Both companies rely heavily on each other on expanding consumer reach through their platforms.

In Europe, Apple has faced many challenges related to its update from other advertising groups arguing that the new update would create additional, unfair trading obligations for app developers. According to [reports from The Hill](#), in March, the National Commission on



Informatics and Liberty (CNIL), France's antitrust watchdog, rejected this idea, saying that the launch of the new feature "did not appear as an abusive practice."

The German Advertising Federation said in a [press release on Monday](#) that it filed an antitrust complaint against Apple, claiming that the tech giant was abusing its market power and violates the antitrust law through the launch of its anti-tracking feature.

"With these unilaterally imposed measures, Apple effectively excludes all competitors from processing commercially relevant data in the Apple ecosystem. At the same time, however, the group is excluding its own [advertising] services from the planned changes and collecting considerable amounts of user data itself," the Federation said in the release.

[According to The Hill](#), in response to the German complaint, Apple defended its update in a statement saying that the data belongs to users, and that they should have a choice in whether or not to share it.

"With iOS 14, we're giving users the choice whether or not they want to allow apps to track them by linking their information with data from third parties for the purpose of advertising, or sharing their information with data brokers," the company said in a statement.

Some netizens have cheered on the update, claiming that it is a huge move towards privacy transparency and encouraging users to download it. Ranking Digital Rights is one of the biggest advocates to push for the update and has called it a huge move for human rights.

The update also includes an updated Face ID that can unlock your phone even with a mask on, over 200 new emojis, dual-sim 5G global support and more.

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Apple Users Now Able to Unlock Face ID With Masks in New Feature Update  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Apple iPhone's face recognition was released in September 2017, which allowed consumers the biometric ability to unlock their phones and access other sensitive data just by glancing at their device. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to wear a mask has made it impossible for consumers to use the iPhone's face ID.

Apple released a new software update Monday that allows users with iPhone X or later to unlock their device using Face ID, even if they are wearing a mask. There's only one catch; you need to have an Apple Watch.

Apple's iOS 14.5 allows the iPhone to communicate with the Apple Watch to verify ID even if it can't detect the user's entire face. As long as the Watch is nearby and out of sleep mode the user will be able to unlock their phone using Face ID. The feature was borrowed from a similar feature available to MAC users allowing them to unlock their computers as long as the Apple Watch was in close proximity.

Once the user's device is running iOS 14.5 and the Apple watch has Watch OS 7.4, they can turn on the new unlock feature in settings under Face ID & Passcode. The security feature also includes a button to lock your phone from the Apple Watch.

Contrary to popular belief, the new feature is not using partial [face recognition](#) and responds to any face prompt it is given. This draws for a minor fallback as it makes it so that someone else wearing a mask in close proximity to the Watch can possibly unlock the device.

Months after the pandemic, Apple attempted to reconcile the issue of face masks by releasing a [beta iOS 13.5](#), which prompted users to enter their passcode instead of continuing the process of failing the face recognition process.

At the time, many Apple users suggested allowing other solutions, such as providing alternate appearance photos, which included Face ID with a mask on, but the system blocked any attempts that were considered to be a face obstruction.

Features of the new update also include a privacy report, which gives Safari users a detailed log of ad trackers that they may have come across while browsing certain sites. There is also a subtle "fake eye contact" feature that makes it appear as though your eyes are looking directly into the camera even if they are focused somewhere else on the screen.

Apple's new update also includes a [transparency feature](#), which has met a lot of praise, as well as dissent because it allows users to decide which apps are allowed to track their data. Through this new attempt at privacy transparency, Apple allows users to block certain apps that record and track data, like Facebook.

Apple has long accused Facebook of showing complete disregard for user privacy, while Facebook has accused Apple of monopolizing its App store. Facebook believes [that following the release of the iOS update, it will face deficits due to the company's reliance on ad revenue](#).

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US Capital Gains Tax Hike to Impact the 'Top 0.3%' of Households, Biden's Top Economic Adviser Says

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Stocks tumbled last week, following the emergence of a report suggesting US President Joe Biden would set forth a new capital gains hike targeting wealthier US taxpayers. Republicans, and even some Democrats, have argued that such a move is too radical, and could have negative ramifications on the US economy.

Brian Deese, director of the National Economic Council, spoke out in support of Biden's capital gains tax proposal during a Monday briefing in the Brady Briefing Room of the White House.

"The reforms that the president will lay out are focused on this top sliver of people and treating capital gains as the same as wages for that top three-tenths of a percent," argued Deese, Biden's top economic adviser.

He repeatedly highlighted the proposed capital gains tax hike will only impact 0.3% of Americans.

"For the other 997 out of 1,000 households in the country ... this is not a change that will be relevant," he said, noting this is "not the top 1%, it's not even the top one-half of 1%."

Deese also told reporters the revenue obtained from the tax hike could be put toward programs and initiatives that have been linked to increased economic success.



"Investments, for example, in early childhood and in our children return enormous dividends in terms of their own academic success, reduced cost in the health-care system, productivity and growth in the future," he added.

Nevertheless, many lawmakers [and economists](#) have cast doubt on the proposal.

"I don't see why the thirst for raising taxes is so incredibly large when we see what ... impact that's going to have on our economy, on our job creation and all that," Sen. Shelley Capito (R-WV) told MSNBC's "Squawk Box" on Friday, following reports of the capital gains tax hike amounting to 43.4%.

It's worth noting the estimated 43.4% is after the addition of investment income tax. As it currently stands, the top capital gains rate is 23.8%, including investment income tax.

"Why don't we move forward and try to live within our means and provide sustainability, in terms of our workforce, and predictability in terms of the tax structure?" she remarked.

Capito also acknowledged that the technology utilized by the Internal Revenue System (IRS) is outdated and in dire need of modernization, so that Americans can ensure everyone is indeed paying their "fair share."

Back in January, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen argued in [written testimony](#) to the Senate Finance Committee that the US tax system "cannot be tilted toward corporate interests and the wealthy, while those that are sustained predominantly by wages bear an unequal burden."

"Biden will require corporations and the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share," she pledged during her confirmation hearing.

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RPT - US Says to Use Opportunities to Engage in Ukraine Diplomacy After Normandy Four Offer

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to exploit opportunities to leverage its involvement in the diplomatic process aimed at resolving the Ukrainian conflict, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has offered to increase the US role in the process by bringing more participants in the Normandy peace talks such as the United Kingdom and Canada in addition to the United States.

"We continue to support the Minsk agreements as the framework for a diplomatic resolution to the Russia-instigated conflict in eastern Ukraine," the spokesperson said on Monday. "In order for this framework to be successful, Russia must implement all of the commitments it signed onto under those agreements and work in good faith to end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. We will continue to take advantage of opportunities to leverage US engagement on Ukraine-Russia conflict diplomacy, but Russia must end its intransigence."

Earlier on Monday, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Moscow believes Zelenskyy's statement on the necessity to introduce changes to the Minsk agreements is a "worrying signal." Peskov also said it is impossible to change the Minsk agreements without putting an end to the accord.

In an interview with Financial Times, Zelenskyy proposed to rewrite the Minsk agreements and expand the number of participants in the Normandy format negotiations by including the United States.

The Normandy Four group - Russia, France, Germany, and Ukraine - was set up in June 2014 as a mediator of the conflict in southeastern Ukraine, after the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, known together as Donbas, proclaimed independence following what they considered to be a coup in Kiev in February of that year. In response, Kiev launched an offensive against the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Ukraine and the United States have recently voiced concerns over the situation on the border with Russia, including about the alleged Russian military buildup, and urged Moscow to deescalate.

Russia said all of its troop movements are aimed at ensuring its national security in response to NATO's buildup near Russia's borders. Russia has also repeatedly said it was not party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

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**UPDATE - Bezos' Blue Origin Protests \$3Bln US Lunar Lander Contract Given to SpaceX - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US space company Blue Origin, owned by Jeff Bezos, said in a statement that it has filed a protest with the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) over the federal government's decision to award Elon Musk's SpaceX a nearly \$3 billion contract to build a lunar landing system that can take astronauts to and from the moon.

Last April, NASA announced that Blue Origin, SpaceX, and Dynetics, would develop lunar landing systems to land astronauts on the Moon beginning in 2024 as part of the Artemis program. NASA was expected to select two of the three companies competing for the bid.

"In NASA's own words, it has made a 'high risk' selection," Blue Origin said on Monday as quoted by CNBC. "Their decision eliminates opportunities for competition, significantly narrows the supply base, and not only delays, but also endangers America's return to the Moon. Because of that, we've filed a protest with the GAO."

Earlier this month, NASA picked SpaceX for the \$2.89 billion contract to develop a lunar landing system.

SpaceX will launch four astronauts aboard an Orion spacecraft for a multi-day journey to lunar orbit. There, two crew members will transfer to the SpaceX human landing system (HLS) that will transport them to the surface of the Moon. After about a week exploring the surface of the Moon, the astronauts will board the lunar landing system for their return trip to the Orion spacecraft to prepare for the trip back to Earth.

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#### Blinken to Visit Ukraine Next Month Ahead of Biden-Putin Summit - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be visiting Ukraine in May ahead of the not yet confirmed Biden-Putin summit that is expected to take place during the summer, CNN reported citing a Ukraine government source.

According to a Ukrainian government source cited by the channel on Monday evening, negotiations between the United States and Ukraine about Blinken's visit to Kiev in May are ongoing while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also hopes to have a meeting with President Joe Biden ahead of his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

When asked to confirm, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik the department has no travel announcements to make at this time.

With respect to the potential Biden-Putin summit, the report said it will take place only after Biden's meetings with the leaders of the G7 and NATO partner states.

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#### Bezos' Blue Origin Protests \$3Bln US Lunar Lander Contract Given to SpaceX - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US space company Blue Origin, owned by Jeff Bezos, said in a statement that it has filed a protest with the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) over the federal government's decision to award Elon Musk's SpaceX a nearly \$3 billion contract to build a lunar landing system on the moon.

Last April, NASA announced that Blue Origin, SpaceX, and Dynetics, would develop lunar landing systems to land astronauts on the Moon beginning in 2024 as part of the Artemis program. NASA was expected to select two of the three companies competing for the bid.

"In NASA's own words, it has made a 'high risk' selection," Blue Origin said on Monday as quoted by CNBC. "Their decision eliminates opportunities for competition, significantly narrows the supply base, and not only delays, but also endangers America's return to the Moon. Because of that, we've filed a protest with the GAO."

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#### RPT- California Validated Enough Signatures to Recall Governor - Secretary of State

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The minimum number of valid signatures needed to proceed with a recall effort against California Governor Gavin Newsom has been reached, with

over 1.6 million signatures gathered and verified, according to recent filings with the office of the Secretary of State.

The number of valid signatures by California residents reached 1,626,042, exceeding the 1,495,709 minimum required for the recall effort to move forward. Once the signatures have been confirmed by officials, a vote to recall the governor will be organized.

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SpaceX Crew Looks Ahead to COVID-19 Vaccine on Return From Space Station - Astronaut

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The US and Japanese SpaceX mission crew on the International Space Station (ISS) are looking forward to their coronavirus vaccinations after flying back to earth this week on the SpaceX Dragon after a more than five month mission, astronaut Shannon Walker said on Monday.

"We will be getting the COVID vaccine seven to ten days after we get back," Walker told a televised National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) press conference from orbit. Walker and US fellow astronauts Michael Hopkins, Victor Glover and Soichi Noguchi from Japan will fly the Dragon spacecraft, named Resilience home at 7:05 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time (EDT), NASA said.

On Friday, another NASA/SpaceX craft commandeered by Shane Kimbrough with Megan McArthur, European Space Agency astronaut Thomas Pesquet and Japanese cosmonaut Akihiro Hoshide flew up to the ISS.

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With respect to the potential Biden-Putin summit, the report said it will take place only after Biden's meetings with the leaders of the G7 and NATO partner states.

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#### US Says to Use Opportunities to Engage in Ukraine Diplomacy After Normandy Four Offer

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to exploit opportunities to leverage its involvement in the diplomatic process aimed at resolving the Ukrainian conflict, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has offered to increase the US role in the process by bringing more participants in the Normandy peace talks such as the United Kingdom and Canada in addition to the United States.

"We continue to support the Minsk agreements as the framework for a diplomatic resolution to the Russia-instigated conflict in eastern Ukraine," the spokesperson said on Monday. "In order for this framework to be successful, Russia must implement all of the commitments it signed onto under those agreements and work in good faith to end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. We will continue to take advantage of opportunities to leverage US engagement on Ukraine-Russia conflict diplomacy, but Russia must end its intransigence."

Earlier on Monday, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Moscow believes Zelenskyy's statement on the necessity to introduce changes to the Minsk agreements is a "worrying signal." Peskov also said it is impossible to change the Minsk agreements without putting an end to the accord.

In an interview with Financial Times, Zelenskyy proposed to rewrite the Minsk agreements and expand the number of participants in the Normandy format negotiations by including the United States.

The Normandy Four group - Russia, France, Germany, and Ukraine - was set up in June 2014 as a mediator of the conflict in southeastern Ukraine, after the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, known together as Donbas, proclaimed independence following what they considered to be a coup in Kiev in February of that year. In response, Kiev launched an offensive against the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Ukraine and the United States have recently voiced concerns over the situation on the border with Russia, including about the alleged Russian military buildup, and urged Moscow to deescalate.

Russia said all of its troop movements are aimed at ensuring its national security in response to NATO's buildup near Russia's borders. Russia has also repeatedly said it was not party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

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**Canada Supports Use of Johnson & Johnson's Vaccine, Will Add Blood Clot Warning-Statement**

TORONTO, April 26 (Sputnik) - The benefits of the coronavirus vaccine produced by Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals outweigh its risks, but a blood clot warning has been added to the product label, Canada's health department and regulator said.

"Cases of rare blood clotting events reported in the US after immunization with the Janssen vaccine are similar to those reported after the AstraZeneca vaccine," Health Canada said in a statement via Twitter on Monday. "As a result, the Janssen product label has been updated to inform Canadians about the signs and symptoms of possible side effects, and when to seek prompt medical attention after vaccination."

"Health Canada continues to consider the benefits of vaccination to outweigh these very rare potential risks, and supports the use of the Janssen and AstraZeneca vaccines in Canada," the statement said.

The first 300,000 doses of the vaccine – approved by Health Canada on March 5 – are set to arrive later this week, according to Public Services and Procurement Canada's Anita Anand.

Canadian health authorities will continue to monitor the safety and efficacy of the vaccine and will take further action, if necessary, the statement added.

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#### **Delta IV Heavy Rocket Propels US Reconnaissance Satellite Into Orbit - Launch Alliance**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United Launch Alliance (ULA) successfully launched a Delta IV heavy rocket at 4:47 pm local Pacific Time carrying heavy satellite payload NROL-82 into orbit for the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

"Plus 60 seconds into this US national security launch of NROL-82 from the West Coast. Delta IV Heavy is traveling over 1,000 mph (miles per hour) already," Mission Control at B Vandenberg announced after the lift-off on Monday.

The Delta IV heavy rocket launched off the pad on schedule the power of three RS-68A main engines generating 2.1 million pounds of thrust. The vehicle hit Mach 1 and surpassed the region of maximum air pressure by T+plus 90 seconds, ULA said.

The outer boosters separated about four minutes into flight, followed by staging and ignition of the second stage two minutes later, ULA added.

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#### **US Says to Use Opportunities to Engage in Ukraine Diplomacy After Normandy Four Offer**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to exploit opportunities to leverage Washington's involvement in the diplomatic process aimed at resolving the Ukrainian conflict, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has offered to increase the role of Washington in the process by bringing more participants in the Normandy peace talks including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

"We continue to support the Minsk agreements as the framework for a diplomatic resolution to the Russia-instigated conflict in eastern Ukraine," the spokesperson said. "In order for this framework to be successful, Russia must implement all of the commitments it signed onto under those agreements and work in good faith to end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. We will continue to take advantage of opportunities to leverage US engagement on Ukraine-Russia conflict diplomacy, but Russia must end its intransigence."

The Kremlin believes that Zelenskyy's statement on the necessity to introduce changes to the Minsk agreements is a "worrying signal," spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

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#### **SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY**

**WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) -**

#### **DIPLOMATIC EXPULSIONS**

- \* Romania has declared Russian Deputy Military Attache Alexey Grishaev a persona non grata, the country's Foreign Ministry said on Monday.
- \* Romania's decision to expel a Russian diplomat is an unfriendly move and Moscow has a right to respond, the Russian embassy in Bucharest told Sputnik.
- \* Russia is expelling a staffer of the Italian embassy in response to a similar decision by Rome, and he will be given 24 hours to leave the country, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- \* The Italian Foreign Ministry expressed regret over Moscow's decision to expel an aide to the defense attache.

#### **CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

- \* The European Union has launched legal action against the AstraZeneca over breaches of a contract on deliveries of coronavirus vaccine doses, Stefan De Keersmaecker, a spokesman for the European Commission, said.
- \* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a lockdown in the country from April 29 to May 17.
- \* The United States will release 60 million Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine doses to other countries as supply increases, Andy Slavitt, a senior advisor to the Biden administration's COVID-19 response team said.
- \* US President Joe Biden spoke over the telephone with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi and vowed the United States would provide India with assistance to help the country fight the coronavirus pandemic, including providing oxygen-related supplies, the White House said.
- \* Russia is concerned about the growing coronavirus incidence in India, the two countries' leaderships could urgently agree on some contact in the coming days, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

#### **RUSSIA-UKRAINE RELATIONS**

- \* Commenting on the possibility for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy may meet on May 9 in Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik that no exact information is available at this time.
- \* Zelenskyy said Ukraine has no issues with the Russian church and the use of the Russian language, but he is still ready to discuss these issues with Putin.
- \* Zelenskyy said that "everything leads to the fact" that his meeting with Putin will take place, adding that he already asked Andrii Yermak, the head of his office, to start working on the organization of the meeting.



#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* The Kremlin believes that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's statement on the necessity to introduce changes to the Minsk agreements is a "worrying signal," spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.
- \* Zelenskyy said that he hopes it will be possible to agree on extra measures to control a ceasefire in Donbas during Easter.
- \* Moscow on Monday declared a staffer of the Ukrainian embassy persona non grata and warned Kiev that further measures will follow if hostile actions against Russian diplomats continue, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- \* Kiev will soon announce a reciprocal measure in response to the expulsion of its diplomat from Russia, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko said.

#### PUTIN-ASSAD TALKS

- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Syrian counterpart, Bashar Assad, discussed cooperation in the COVID-19 response, the upcoming presidential election in the Arab country and the activities of the Syrian constitutional committee during a phone conversation on Monday, the Kremlin said.

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#### S&P500, Nasdaq Hit Record Highs As Earnings Fueled Week for US Stocks Begins

NEW YORK, April 26 (Sputnik) - The S&P500 and Nasdaq Composite Index hit record highs on Monday as investors braced for the start of a heavy week of US corporate earnings results that were likely to deliver top marks to technology companies and other blue-chip stocks.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, hit a record high of 4,194 before settling at 4,189, up 9 points, or 0.2 percent on the day. For the year, the index was up 11.5 percent.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index rose to an all-time high of 14,154 before closing at 14,138, up 122 points or 0.9 percent. High-flying Nasdaq stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google, are due to report quarterly earnings this week. Nasdaq is up 9.7 percent on the year.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator comprising mostly industrial stocks, closed down 61.92 points, or 0.2 percent, at 33,982. The Dow remains up 11 percent for the year.

Analysts said tech companies especially were on track to report blockbuster earnings from another pandemic-restricted quarter that fueled web surfing, online shopping and stay-home work and play activities.

The wave of corporate earnings seen over the past week has so far topped Wall Street estimates, and if the momentum continues, the S&P500 could be set for its best quarterly performance in more than a decade.

While stocks saw some periodic weakness on Monday from President Joe Biden's higher capital gains tax plans that led to the Dow's lower close, they mostly regained their upward momentum after White House Economic Adviser Brian Deese said the changes would only affect the wealthiest Americans or 0.3 percent of the population.

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Family of Black Man Shot Dead by Officers in N. Carolina Shown 20-Second Clip - Attorneys

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The family of Andrew Brown, a black man who was fatally shot by police in the state of North Carolina, were only shown a 20-second video clip of the incident by the local authorities, the family attorneys said in a press conference on Monday. Andrew Brown was shot dead by police last week after allegedly driving away from police who were executing a search warrant at his residence.

"We saw one video, 20 seconds, from one body camera," one attorney said. "There was things that transpired before those 20 seconds that we did not see it."

The attorney said the video appears to show Brown with his hands on the wheel of his vehicle on the driveway of his home when he was shot multiple times by police officers that used handguns and assault rifles. The attorney said Brown eventually drove off to evade the gunfire and appeared to be trying to avoid hitting any police officers.

The family's legal team described Brown's death as an execution and called for the immediate arrest of the police officers involved in the shooting.

The family attorney's said the video may be released to the public on Wednesday if a local judge grants approval.

Earlier on Monday, Mayor Bettie Parker declared a state of emergency in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in anticipation of civil unrest due to the soon-to-be-released police body camera footage of the fatal officer-involved shooting in Brown's death.

The police said Brown was a convicted felon with a history of resisting arrest and they deemed the execution of the warrant to constitute a high-risk, dangerous situation.

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US Does Not Expect Defense Relationship With Turkey to Change - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect the military relationship between Washington and Ankara to change after President Joe Biden officially recognized the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We don't anticipate any change in the military relationship with Turkey," Kirby told reporters on Monday.



The spokesperson stressed that Turkey remains a vital NATO ally and noted also that Biden's announcement will not impact joint operations in Syria.

Despite Kirby's assurances, Ankara expressed outrage over Saturday's announcement made on Armenia's Remembrance Day. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday called Biden's decision regretful and a source told Sputnik that Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had summoned US Ambassador David Satterfield to voice its opposition to the statement.

Turkey, which traditionally rejects the assertions of genocide, has repeatedly warned the Biden administration that such a move by the United States would hurt bilateral relations.

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#### Capital Gains Tax Hike to Affect 0.3% Of Americans, Make System 'Fairer' - White House

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's plan to raise the capital gains tax on the highest earning Americans will only affect 0.3 percent of the population and those making more than \$1 million per year, a number that makes up less than 500,000 households, White House Economic Adviser Brian Deese said on Monday.

"This reform would be to change how we tax capital gains," Deese, who is also director of the National Economic Council, told a media briefing. "That's income from selling stocks and other assets for taxpayers that make more than \$1 million per year in income. This change will only apply to three tenths of a percent of taxpayers, which is not even the top one percent. That's about 500,000 households in the country that we're talking about."

Biden, who will unveil details of the plan in his first speech to the joint session of Congress on Wednesday, has said he wants to raise \$1 trillion per year to fund childcare, universal pre-kindergarten education and paid leave for workers, US media reported.

While the US president was only targeting a sliver of taxpayers with high rates, his aim was to establish a system that would be fair to all, Deese said.

"The tax rate for the highest earners now is lower than many middle-class families' tax rate. This is the dynamic that led Warren Buffett to famously explain that he paid a lower tax rate than his secretary," the White House adviser said, referring to the top billionaire stock market investor.

"It's the dynamic that has led the president and others to argue that we need to do something about equalizing the taxation of work and wealth in this country."

Deese said the last US president to significantly attempt to equalize the treatment of ordinary income and capital gains was Ronald Reagan, back in 1986.

"Of course, we will be raising to higher rates than in that reform, but a lot has also changed in the economy since then," Deese added

Big businesses are, however, vehemently opposed to any massive tax hike on capital gains, with the US Chamber of Commerce, which represents more than 3 million business owners in the country, vowing to defeat Biden's plan.

The US Treasury has separately announced plans to raise the US corporate tax rate to 28 percent from 21 percent as part of Biden's plan to fund a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure program.

Republican rivals to Biden's Democratic Party in Congress have suggested that his infrastructure bill be no larger than \$568 billion, or just about a quarter of what he proposed.

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#### Iran Vessels Harass US Ships in Persian Gulf - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Boats from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps harassed US Coast Guard ships earlier this month in the Persian Gulf, the first such altercation in a year, the Wall Street Journal reported on Monday.

US Navy officials confirmed to the newspaper that three fast attack crafts and one support vessel known as Harth 55 swarmed the two Coast Guard ships while they were patrolling international waters in the southern portion of the Persian Gulf.

The incident, which has not been officially disclosed, occurred on April 2 as the United States and Iran are conducting indirect negotiations on the resumption of the 2015 nuclear agreement.

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#### US to Send COVID-19 'Strike Team' to Assist India - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will send a special strike team to India to help the country fight the new spike in coronavirus cases, a senior Biden administration official told reporters on Monday.

"US CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] working with USAID [US Agency for International Development] will urgently deploy a strike team to India, which will include public health experts to work in close collaboration with our embassy, with Indian health industry experts and with India's epidemic intelligence service staff," the official said during virtual press briefing.

The strike team will work with Indian health officials and practitioners in a number of areas, including laboratory services surveillance and epidemiology, the official said.

The United States is also exploring options to provide India with oxygen and related supplies, as well as training assistance and transportation services, the official added.

The Indian authorities reported last week 17.3 million new cases - the highest number since the pandemic began more than a year ago - and said the country is facing severe shortage of oxygen for medical purposes.

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#### Texas Gains 2 US House Seats, 5 States Gain 1 Seat Each - Census Bureau



WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Five US states have gained a seat in the House of Representatives - Montana, Oregon, Florida, North Carolina, and Colorado - while the sixth, Texas, gained two, d States Census Bureau Ron Jarmin said during a news conference on Monday.

"Six states will gain seats in the House of Representatives: Texas will gain two seats, and Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina, and Oregon will each gain one seat," Jarmin said. California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia each lost a seat. This represents the smallest shift in the House of Representatives seats since the new apportionment method was adopted in 1941, as well as the first time that California has ever lost a seat.

Each member of the House represented about 34,000 residents following the 1790 Census. The House has since grown from 105 to 435 seats, with each member now representing an average of 761,169 people following the 2020 Census.

The reapportioned Congress will not be in effect until the 118th Congress convenes in 2023.

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US Homeland Security Dept. Launches Internal Hunt For Violent Extremists - Mayorkas  
WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has initiated an internal assessment to identify and root out violent extremists within the organization, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said on Monday.

"Domestic violent extremism poses the most lethal and persistent terrorism-related threat to our country today," Mayorkas said in a statement. "We must be vigilant in our efforts to identify and combat domestic violent extremism within both the broader community and our own organization. Hateful acts and violent extremism will not be tolerated within our Department." Mayorkas has made identifying, addressing, and preventing domestic violent extremism across our country a top priority, the announcement noted.

"At the direction of the Secretary, a cross-Departmental working group comprised of senior officials will immediately begin a comprehensive review of how to best prevent, detect, and respond to threats related to domestic violent extremism within DHS," the statement said. The internal team, led by the department's chief security officer, will produce a report with recommendations for the secretary on how best to identify and respond to threats related to domestic violent extremism, including those based on racially- or ethnically-motivated violent extremism, the statement explained.

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More B-52 Bombers Arrive in Qatar to Protect US Troop Pullout From Afghanistan - Air Force

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Two additional B-52 bombers have arrived in Qatar to provide security for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan that will begin May 1, the Air Force said on Monday.

"Two US Air Force B-52H Stratofortress aircraft from the 5th Bomb Wing, Minot Air Force Base, [North Dakota], arrived at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, April 26," the Air Force said in a press release.

The two bombers are joining two other B-52 bombers that arrived at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar last week.

The bombers will be responsible for ensuring protection of American and NATO forces on the ground in Afghanistan if needed during the withdrawal from the country.

The United States and NATO will withdraw ground forces from Afghanistan starting on May 1 with a deadline to be completely out of the country by September 11.

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Seven US States Lose 1 Seat at US House Due to New Population Numbers - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Seven US states, including California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, have each lost one seat at the House of Representatives after the results of the latest Census, US Census Bureau Acting Director Ron Jarmin said during a news conference on Monday.

"Seven states will each lose one seat in the House: California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia," Jarmin said.

Five of the seven seats will be reapportioned to the states of Montana, Oregon, Florida, North Carolina, while the remaining two will be given to Texas.

California is losing a seat at the House of Representatives for the first time in its history.

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Texas Gains 2 US House Seats After Census, Five States Gain 1 Seat Each - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Five states have gained a seat in the House of Representatives — Montana, Oregon, Florida, North Carolina, and Colorado — while a sixth, Texas, gained two, Acting Director of the United States Census Bureau Ron Jarmin said during a news conference on Monday.

"Six states will gain seats in the House of Representatives: Texas will gain two seats, and Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina, and Oregon will each gain one seat," Jarmin said. California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia each lost a seat in turn. This represents the smallest shift in House seats since the new apportionment method was adopted in 1941.

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#### US Population Increases by 7.4% in Past Decade to Reach 331.5Mln in 2020 - Census

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The population in the United States has grown by 7.4 percent between 2010 and 2020 to a total of 331.5 million, US Census Bureau Acting Director Ron Jarmin said during a news conference on Monday.

"According to the 2020 census, the number of people living in the United States was 331, 449, 281. This represents an increase of 7.4 percent over the official population count from the 2010 census," Jarmin said.

This represents the second slowest growth rate in US history, only slightly greater than the lowest point of 7.3 percent between 1930 and 1940.

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#### US Energy Chief Warns Big Oil to Go Green or Go Bankrupt

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Big oil firms need to get behind the Biden administration's goal to halve US emissions by 2030 and diversify into greener alternatives if they do not wish to face bankruptcy, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said on Monday.

"The auto industry went bankrupt, the suppliers went bankrupt and it was a shake-up,"

Granholm said in a live-streamed interview with the Politico website, referring to the 2008-2009 financial crisis era, where the US car industry shrunk after a period of high oil prices. "So before any oil companies start to go bankrupt, [they] have got to diversify. They need to move to clean energy solutions."

Granholm said electrification of the auto industry was definitely coming in a big way.

"The proof will be in the pudding but the bottom line is, you have got to move and you can't hang on and be, you know, be the Kodak or the Blockbuster video of the energy world," she said, referring to the legendary camera-film and US video rental labels. "With internal combustion engines, we saw the threat from imports that had much better fuel-economy. You've got to diversify now."

Once resistant to carbon reduction initiatives, the world's biggest oil companies have started playing ball with the global move toward cleaner energies.

Exxon Mobil, for instance, unveiled a plan to build one of the world's largest projects for carbon capture and storage along the Houston Ship Channel in Texas that would cost \$100 billion and process 100 million metric tons of CO2 per year.

Shell, meanwhile, has announced plans to ramp up its use of nature-based carbon offsets, which include forestation projects, to 120 million tonnes a year by 2030.

In the technology and environment section of his American Jobs Plan unveiled last month, Biden proposed an allotment of \$174 billion for setting up charging stations and to providing



consumer rebates for American-made electric vehicles, with a pledge to electrify the government's entire transportation fleet.

Granholm was non-committal when asked if there will be a bigger tax credit than \$7,500 a year for Americans to switch from gasoline- and diesel-powered cars. "We'll see what is negotiated," she said, referring to the barter process expected between Biden's Democratic Party and its Republican rival in Congress.

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White House Does Not Have Confirmation on Timing, Details of Biden-Putin Summit - Psaki

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The White House does not have confirmation on the details or timing of a potential summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Monday.

"We are not quite there yet," Psaki said. "We don't have confirmation of any details yet or proposed timeline quite yet."

Earlier in the day, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov did not confirm that the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart, Joe Biden, was scheduled for June 15-16. He said they can meet in the summer, but neither the exact date nor the venue has been set yet.

On Sunday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Moscow has positively received US President Joe Biden's proposal to hold a summit with Russian leader Vladimir Putin, and it is currently being studied.

Earlier in April, Putin and Biden held a phone conversation to discuss bilateral ties during which the US president proposed the Russian leader to hold a personal meeting in a third country in the near future.

Lavrov said that Moscow was still ready to take measures if Washington further escalated tensions in bilateral relations.

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Blinken in Call With Ethiopian Premier Calls to for Tigray Troop Withdrawal - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in telephone talks with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed advocated for the pullout of forces by Ethiopia and Eritrea from the Tigray region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed today to reiterate the United States' grave concern about the deteriorating humanitarian and human rights crisis in the country, including the growing risk of famine in Ethiopia's Tigray region as well

as ongoing insecurity in other parts of the country," Price said. "The Secretary pressed for Ethiopia's and Eritrea's commitments to withdraw Eritrean troops from Tigray to be implemented immediately, in full, and in a verifiable manner."

Blinken emphasized that the Eritrean forces and Amhara regional forces in Tigray are adding to the deteriorating humanitarian situation as well as committing human rights abuses, Price went on to say.

"The Secretary also stressed the need for all parties to the conflict to end hostilities immediately," Price said. "Secretary Blinken welcomed the joint Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights investigation in Tigray to document human rights abuses and stressed the need for justice and accountability measures to hold those responsible to account."

Blinken also revealed that US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa would visit Ethiopia in the coming days, Price concluded.

Armed conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government started last November after the TPLF attacked and stole weapons from an Ethiopia military base in order to arm an anti-government militia in the region. The conflict has since caused much displacement and food insecurity in the Tigray, while also making it more difficult for international organizations to provide aid to people affected by the crises.

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US Justice Dept. to Probe Policing Practices in Louisville, Kentucky - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department will investigate the policing practices in Louisville, Kentucky, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Monday.

"Today, the Justice Department is opening a civil investigation into the Louisville Jefferson County Metro Government and the Louisville Metro Police Department to determine whether LMPD engages in a pattern or practice in violations of the constitution or federal law," Garland said in a press conference.

The investigation is coming in the wake of the 2020 death of Breonna Taylor, who was shot dead while with her boyfriend when police entered their home to execute a warrant. Detectives Joshua Jaynes and Myles Cosgrove were fired after the incident for violating operating procedures when obtaining and serving the search warrant.

Garland said the investigation will determine whether the Louisville Metro Police Department engages in the use of unreasonable force, including against peaceful protesters; conducts unconstitutional stops, searches, and seizures; engages in racial profiling; or unlawfully executes search warrants on private homes.

If the investigation finds violations, the Justice Department will issue a public report of its findings and push to have local authorities improve policing practices through a binding agreement, Garland said.

Last week, the Justice Department announced it opened an investigation into the policing practices by the Minneapolis Police Department, a day after a jury found Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin guilty of second-degree and third-degree murder as well as second-degree manslaughter for his role in the death of George Floyd last May.

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**Blinken Tells Ethiopian Prime Minister US Special Envoy to Visit Country Soon - State Dept**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked over the telephone with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and revealed that the newly appointed Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa will head to Ethiopia in the coming days, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"The Secretary noted his appointment of a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa and noted that Ambassador Feltman would travel to Ethiopia in the coming days," Price said in a readout of the conversation.

On Friday, Blinken announced that veteran diplomat Jeffrey Feltman has been appointed US Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa and will lead the United States' response to the crisis in the region.

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Supreme Court to Hear US Govt. Appeal to Shield Ex-CIA Contractors From Probe - Order

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Supreme Court will hear an appeal from the US government to protect two former CIA contractors from being questioned by a Guantanamo Bay inmate and terror suspect who alleges they tortured him in a facility in Poland in 2002 and 2003, a legal order said on Monday.

"United States v Zubaydah, Abu Et. Al. The petitions for writs of certiorari are granted," the order stated.

Abu Zubaydah is a Palestinian terror suspect who has been held in the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay for 15 years. The ruling means he can gain access to US government information classified as state secrets by questioning two former CIA contractors.

Abu Zubaydah was captured in Pakistan after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States and was initially detained in CIA detention holding centers abroad. The US government alleges he was linked to and supported al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden. Zubaydah wants to question the two former CIA contractors about a secret agency facility in Poland, where he claims to have been tortured in 2002 and 2003. The 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled in 2019 that the contractors could face questioning. But the Biden administration has now appealed against that decision to the Supreme Court.

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UN Mideast Envoy Meets Israeli Officials Over Escalation in Gaza - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland met on Monday with Israeli officials to discuss the recent escalation in Jerusalem and around Gaza, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing.

"Mr. Wennesland will continue with his work to de-escalate tensions," Haq said. "He met with Israeli officials today, and he's going to travel tomorrow to Jordan and Egypt for further discussion."

Over the weekend, the situation on the Palestinian enclave's border severely escalated as 40 rockets were launched from Gaza toward Israel's territory. Several of these rockets were intercepted by the latter's Iron Dome Aerial Defense System.

In response, Israel targeted the infrastructure of the Hamas movement in Gaza. In the most recent attack occurring last night, three rockets were fired in the direction of Israel, according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Along with that, the IDF released a video showing the two rockets getting intercepted by the Iron Dome.

In a statement on Saturday, Wennesland condemned these acts of violence and called on all sides to show maximum restraint and avoid further escalation.

Hamas, a Palestinian Sunni militant organization in control of the Gaza Strip, has been locked in a protracted on-and-off conflict with Israel, which still refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity. Israel holds Hamas responsible for any attack coming from the Gaza Strip.

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**Biden Commits in Talks With Modi US Emergency Assistance to India - White House**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke over the telephone with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi and vowed the United States would provide India with assistance to help the country fight the coronavirus pandemic, including providing oxygen-related supplies, the White House said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, committing that the United States and India will work closely together in the fight against COVID-19," the readout said. "The President pledged America's steadfast support for the people of India who have been impacted by the recent surge in COVID-19 cases. In response, the United States is providing a range of emergency assistance, including oxygen-related supplies, vaccine materials, and therapeutics."

India is experiencing a spike in coronavirus cases with the latest data revealed a total of 17.3 million cases, including 14.3 million recoveries and 195,000 virus/related fatalities.

"Prime Minister Modi expressed appreciation for the strong cooperation between both countries," the White House said. "The two leaders resolved that the United States and India will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the effort to protect our citizens and the health of our communities."

The United States, United Kingdom and Germany have already offered support to India to assist the country in handling the situation. Russia is reported to have offered to supply medical oxygen and the antiviral medication Remdesivir.

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## Top US Spy Agency Establishing Center to Counter Foreign Influence Operations - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) is working to establish a federal government hub to combat foreign meddling, Politico reported on Monday.

The Foreign Malign Influence Center will integrate all relevant intelligence and provide assessments and warnings to policymakers, the report said, citing an ODNI statement.

The decision to create the hub comes after US intelligence agencies released a declassified report accusing Russia of attempting to sway the 2020 presidential election and impede Joe Biden's victory. Russia denies the allegations.

ODNI was directed to establish the new center covering malign influence activities by Russia, Iran, North Korea and China in a recent intelligence authorization bill.

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## UN Special Envoy Meets Myanmar Military Chief in Jakarta - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener met with the country's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing on the sidelines of a regional summit in Jakarta, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Monday.

"She had a number of engagements in Jakarta, including with a number of the foreign ministers who were present from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and she also had a meeting with Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing," Haq said.

The UN spokesperson did not provide any details about the meeting besides saying that Schraner Burgener aimed to maintain dialogue with all stakeholders.

On Saturday, ASEAN leaders gathered for a summit in Jakarta to discuss the deadly protests in Myanmar against the military authorities. They urged the military to stop violence against civilians, release all political prisoners and receive an ASEAN delegation, including a high-ranking representative of the ASEAN chair country and the secretary-general of the association.

Schraner Burgener arrived in Bangkok, Thailand, earlier in the month in an effort to calm the situation in Myanmar. She said then the Myanmar military had declined her request to visit the country.

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## Apple Commits to Invest \$430Bln, Create 20,000 Jobs in US Over 5 Years



WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Apple has announced its plans to invest \$430 billion in the US economy in the next 5 years and create 20,000 jobs, the company said in a release on Monday.

"Apple today announced an acceleration of its US investments, with plans to make new contributions of more than \$430 billion and add 20,000 new jobs across the country over the next five years," the release said. "This includes tens of billions of dollars for next-generation silicon development and 5G innovation across nine US states."

Apple is set to raise the level of its American investments by 20 percent as the company spent way over \$350 billion according to the five-year plan set in 2018, the release noted.

As part of the new plan, the tech giant plans to invest \$1 billion in a new North Carolina campus and engineering hub creating at least 3,000 new jobs in machine learning, artificial intelligence, and software engineering, the release added.

Apple will also expand its teams in California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Texas, Washington, and Iowa over the next years, the release also said.

According to the release, Apple supports more than 2.7 million jobs in the US and continues to be the largest taxpayer in the country with nearly \$45 billion paid in domestic corporate income taxes over the past five years alone.

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US Welcomes UK Establishment of Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regime - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes London's creation of a global anti-corruption sanctions regime, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a statement on Monday.

"The United States commends the United Kingdom on the establishment of a Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regime, which reinforces the US-UK partnership in the fight against corruption and illicit finance," Blinken said. "Corruption undermines the rule of law, weakens citizens' trust in their governments, hampers economic growth, and facilitates transnational crime and human rights abuses."

Earlier in the day, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab presented a set of rules on international anti-corruption sanctions to the UK parliament.

London plans to fight corruption around the world by freezing assets and banning foreigners involved in serious corruption schemes from entering the UK.

Blinken said the United States looks forward to continuing its partnership with like-minded governments and civil society.

In a separate statement, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen also welcomed the UK's move, stressing that it gives London an authority similar to the United States' Global Magnitsky program and Canada's Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act.

Yellen added that Washington's sanctions are "more likely to compel changes in behavior and disrupt threatening activities when pursued in concert with our allies."

The United Kingdom on Monday added 14 Russians to its anti-corruption sanctions list, which also contains citizens of other countries, according to the updated document published on the government's website.

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#### US Capitol Police Says Arrested Virginia Man for Hopping Protective Fence

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States Capitol Police (USCP) said on Monday that it has arrested a Virginia man for hopping the protective fencing around the US Capitol complex late on Sunday night.

"A man is in custody this afternoon after he entered a restricted area inside the perimeter fence. At 11:38 pm a man scaled the fence along First Street, SW. The suspect, 22-year-old Marc Beauchamp of Henrico, VA, was immediately stopped by several officers and arrested for unlawful entry," the USCP said via Twitter.

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#### Biden Commits in Talks With Modi US Emergency Assistance to India - White House

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke over the telephone with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi and vowed the United States would provide India with assistance to help the country fight the coronavirus pandemic, including providing oxygen-related supplies, the White House said in a readout of the conversation on Monday. "President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, committing that the United States and India will work closely together in the fight against COVID-19," the readout said. "The President pledged America's steadfast support for the people of India who have been impacted by the recent surge in COVID-19 cases. In response, the United States is providing a range of emergency assistance, including oxygen-related supplies, vaccine materials, and therapeutics."

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#### US to Release 60 Mln AstraZeneca Doses to Other Countries as Supply Increases - WH Advisor

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The United States will release 60 million Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine doses to other countries as supply increases, Andy Slavitt, a senior advisor to the Biden administration's COVID-19 response team said on Monday. "US to release 60 million Astra Zeneca doses to other countries as they become available," Slavitt said in a statement via Twitter.

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#### **Biden Plan to Halve US Emissions Achievable Without Carbon Tax - Energy Secretary**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's stated goal to halve US emissions by 2030 is achievable even without imposing a carbon tax, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in an interview on Monday.

"It's achievable," Granholm told Politico when asked whether Biden's set target was more aspirational. "I know Joe Biden has not put an overall economy-wide price on carbon. Many other countries have and I know a lot of economists believe that is the most efficient thing to do, but this administration is not there yet. This administration wants to use the American Jobs Plan, using the carrots that they have there to incentivize and move away from carbon pollution." US media has said while a carbon tax may be the most effective way for Biden to achieve his climate goals, he was restrained by his promise of not adding taxes on Americans earning less than \$400,000 a year effectively making the US president fight the battle with one hand tied behind his back.

Granholm said the market is \$23 trillion for the products that will reduce carbon dioxide.

"That's so big, it's mind-blowing. And you better believe all these other countries are looking at that and saying 'I want a piece of that. I want to see jobs in my country.' And so, are we going to be passive as a nation? Are we just going to let other countries take this? And we've seen what happens when China corners the market on critical minerals," she added.

Granholm noted that US manufacturing had descended to such levels "that we don't have the ability in the United States anymore to do even semiconductor fabs," referring to the fabrication of microchips.

The Energy Secretary pointed out that transitioning public vehicles from fossil-fuel to electricity-power was another major piece of the emissions target.

"The Biden administration is determined that we get through Congress the component that electrifies our transportation sector for jobs because the transportation sector is the one area where we have not done anything to address greenhouse gas emissions," Granholm said. "So we're going to use every tool we can to make this happen. The American jobs plan is obviously a big piece of that but electrification is the big tool in the toolbox."

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#### UN Looking Into Reports of Navalny Office Closures - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is looking into the reports about the suspension of movement at the headquarters of jailed Russian opposition activist Alexey Navalny, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Monday.

"We're looking into these reports," Haq said when asked to comment on the closure of Navalny's offices.

The Moscow Prosecutor's Office also filed an application to the Moscow City Court to suspend the activities of the non-profit organizations FBK - Anti-Corruption Foundation that performs the functions of a foreign agent in Russia - and the Citizens' Rights Protection Foundation

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#### US Sanctions 2 Guatemalan Officials for Corrupt Activities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States on Monday imposed sanctions on a Guatemalan government official and his former colleague for being engaged in corrupt activities, the US Department of the Treasury announced.

"This action targets Gustavo Adolfo Alejos Cambara, the former Chief of Staff for the Alvaro Colom presidential administration, and Felipe Alejos Lorenzana, an elected delegate to the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala," the Treasury Department said in a statement. They were designated pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act which targets those deemed in the United States as "perpetrators of serious human rights abuse and corruption around the world."

"When elected officials in Guatemala pursue self-enrichment in their official duties, it is an affront to democratic principles in the region," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said.

"This action serves to shine a light on corruption and promote accountability for those who would seek to thwart the judicial process," she added.

Both officials and their immediate family members were first designated last year "under Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act due to their involvement in significant corruption."

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#### Trudeau's Liberal Party Maintains Double Digit Canada-Wide Lead - Poll

TORONTO, April 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's governing Liberal Party led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau maintains a double-digit nationwide lead ahead of an anticipated federal election later in the year, a new Ipsos poll revealed on Monday.

"If an election were held tomorrow, 38 percent of decided voters would vote for the Liberals (down 2 points) led by Justin Trudeau, while 27 percent would vote for Erin O'Toole and the Conservatives (down 3 points)," Ipsos said regarding the poll results.

Canada's left wing New Democrat Party (NDP) - up 6 percent - finds itself in third place, with 19 percent support among decided voters, according to the poll results.

The poll also revealed that Canadians are largely indifferent to the first federal budget in more than two years, tabled last week by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, with 62 percent "shrugging shoulders" at the financial plan. An equal number of two groups of respondents, 19 percent each, gave the plan positive and negative reviews.

Throughout the winter, pundits speculated that the document would trigger a national election, however, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said ahead of the presentation that his party would not trigger an election, suggesting support for the document.

Support from 24 NDP parliamentarians would be enough for the budget to be signed into law, and Singh has previously supported the minority Liberal in matters of confidence.

Despite Singh's reluctance to trigger an election, most Canadian political analysts still believe an election is likely, although conceding that it would be pushed back to later in the year.

The budget, which revealed the deficit to stand at a record \$282.67 billion, got a lukewarm reception by opposition parties.

People's Party of Canada leader Maxime Bernier told Sputnik that the budget is a precursor to long-term stagflation and an attempt to woo potential voters ahead.

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#### **N. Carolina's Elizabeth City Declares State of Emergency Ahead of Police Footage Release**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Elizabeth City, North Carolina, has declared a state of emergency in anticipation of civil unrest due to the soon-to-be-released police body camera footage of the shooting of Andrew Brown Jr., a black man who was killed by officers during the execution of a search warrant last week, Mayor Bettie Parker said in a statement.

"In order to ensure the safety of our citizens and their property, city officials realize there may potentially be a period of civil unrest within the city following the public release of that footage," Parker said. "In order to absolutely ensure that the city has all state and/or federal resources necessary to protect our citizens during any such period of civil unrest, we deem it necessary to declare a State of Emergency within the city of Elizabeth City, North Carolina beginning on Monday April 26, 2021 at 8:00 a.m."

Brown was shot dead by police after allegedly driving away from authorities who were executing a search warrant at his residence.

The police said Brown was a convicted felon with a history of resisting arrest and they deemed the execution of the warrant to constitute a high-risk, dangerous situation.

The proclamation of state of emergency comes shortly after former Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty for the death of George Floyd on second and third degree murder and

manslaughter charges. Protests against police brutality in city of Minneapolis turned into riots in 2020 and spread throughout the United States.

By declaring a state of emergency, officials have been given greater resources and authority to protect the lives and property of residents, including the possibility of including state or federal assistance.

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**Gun Lobby Wins Right to Appeal Against New York Weapons Carry Ban - US Supreme Court**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - A group associated with the National Rifle Association (NRA) has won the right to appeal against New York State's denial of applications for citizens to carry concealed handguns in public, the US Supreme Court said in an order on Monday.

"[In the case of] New York State Rifle Et. Al. v Corlett, Keith Et. Al. The petition for a writ of certiorari is granted limited to the following question: Whether the State's denial of petitioners' applications for concealed-carry licenses for self-defense violated the Second Amendment," the Supreme Court said.

A New York State court ruled against two gun owners and the NRA-affiliated New York Rifle group when they tried to legally challenge the legitimacy of the restrictions on the carrying of concealed handguns in public places.

The plaintiffs had claimed that New York State's restrictions violated the Second Amendment of the US Constitution on the right to have and carry guns.

The Supreme Court currently has a six to three conservative majority that generally supports the right to bear arms. However, President Joe Biden has issued an Executive Order creating a commission to study if the Supreme Court may be reformed and expanded in size - moves that may increase liberal influence and membership on it.

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**US May Approve Local Lawsuits Against Volkswagen on Emissions Scandal - Supreme Court**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice has the right to approve local legal action against the German automobile maker Volkswagen over its previous efforts to hide the true level of diesel engine emissions from the vehicles it sold in the United States, the Supreme Court announced in an order on Monday.

"Volkswagen Group Et. Al v EPC of Hillsborough Cty [County] Et. Al. The Acting Solicitor General is invited to file a brief in this case expressing the views of the United States," the order said.

Hillsborough County is in the US state of Florida.

The ruling means that the Biden administration has the authority to decide whether Hillsborough County in Florida and the Salt Lake City County local government in the state of Utah can sue Volkswagen and the Robert Bosch auto supplier for damages in the affair under their own locally-issued regulations.

The precedent could open the way for Volkswagen to be sued by other local authorities in the United States whose emission standards were secretly broken by the company's vehicles. Two other major European-based auto manufacturers, Daimler in Germany and Fiat Chrysler/Stellantis based in the Netherlands, are already facing similar potential legal actions.

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#### US Ambassador to UN Urges International Community to Prepare for Next Pandemic

UNITED NATIONS, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Monday urged the international community to prepare for the next pandemic.

Thomas-Greenfield spoke at a closed virtual UN meeting, co-hosted by the United States, Japan, Norway and South Africa, on pandemic preparedness and response.

"The takeaway from this past year is clear: the world barely withstood this pandemic. We must be ready for the next," Thomas-Greenfield said.

The ambassador said world leaders need to address issues, including establishing sustainable health security financing, implementing accountability mechanisms for oversight and identifying triggers for surge capacity that will enable for a rapid response when the next pandemic hits.

Thomas-Greenfield also noted that the United States will participate later in the week in the high-level meeting on antimicrobial resistance, where it will adopt a new call to action.

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#### US Congressman Doug Collins From Georgia Announces He Will Not Run for Reelection

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Doug Collins, a Republican from the state of Georgia, announced on Monday that he will not run for re-election in the next election cycle.

"I am announcing today that I will not be a candidate for any office in the next election cycle. It has been a joy to serve in both the Georgia Legislature and the United States Congress," Collins said via Twitter.

Collins served in the House of Representatives from 2013 to 2021 representing Georgia's 9th congressional district. A political ally of former President Donald Trump, Collins was one of the 126 Republican congressmen who supported the lawsuit challenging the results of the 2020 elections.



However, Collins also said in his statement that the decision not to run was likely only a temporary departure from politics and he intends to keep helping and shaping the conservative movement in Georgia.

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US to Provide Food to Over 30M In Children From Low Income Families - Agriculture Dept. WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide food assistance to more than 30 million American children from low-income families during the summer as part of the American Rescue Plan, the US Department of Agriculture said in a release on Monday. "The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) today announced a new effort funded by the American Rescue Plan to provide adequate nutrition to more than 30 million children over the summer by expanding Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) benefits," the release said. "This summer, USDA will offer P-EBT benefits to all low-income children of all ages, helping families put food on the table during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Families with children who are eligible to receive reduced-price meals or if they are under 6 years old will receive \$6.82 per child per weekday, or a total of \$375 per child over the entire summer, the release explained.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in the release that the expansion of P-EBT benefits is a game-changer to reduce child hunger in the United States.

P-EBT program was established in March 2020 to assist families after schools closed as a result of the coronavirus measures, which deprived children from low-income households of their school meals.

Some 29 million adults and 12 million children in the United States have not always had enough food throughout the pandemic, according to the Agriculture Department.

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#### Canada Health Regulator Approves First COVID-19 Self-Test Kit

TORONTO, April 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's health regulator has approved the country's first COVID-19 self-test kit, manufacturer Lucira Health said on Monday.

"The... CHECK IT COVID-19 test kit is the first self-test authorized by Health Canada for individuals with or without symptoms. It delivers PCR quality molecular accuracy in 30 minutes or less at home and is expected to be available online for Canadians to order by June 2021," Lucira Health said in a statement.

The test works by analyzing a self-collected nasal swab within approximately 30 minutes, the company said, adding that it will be available to consumers for purchase without prescription. The test kit will retail for \$60.36, Lucira Health said.

This kit is the first self-administered COVID-19 test kit approved for use in the United States by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), having received emergency use authorization in November.

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Canada Inks COVID-19 Testing Deal to Screen Foreign Workers Entering Quebec - Statement TORONTO, April 26 (Sputnik) - The government of Canada has inked a deal with a medical laboratory services company to screen temporary foreign workers entering the province of Quebec for the novel coronavirus, Public Services and Procurement Canada said on Monday. "Anita Anand, Minister of Public Services and Procurement, announced that the Government of Canada has signed a new agreement with Dynacare, valued at approximately \$2 million [US\$1.61 million], to provide dedicated testing support for temporary foreign workers arriving by air in Quebec," the government said in a statement.

The agreement will shore up Canada's ability to deal with the expected influx of temporary foreign workers in the coming months, the statement read.

Dynacare will begin screening passengers inbound to Canada through the Montreal international airport beginning on April 28, according to the statement.

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Fewer Than 1 in 4 Americans Willing to Take Johnson & Johnson COVID Vaccine - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Fewer than 1 in 4 Americans not yet immunized against the coronavirus are willing to take the vaccine made by Johnson & Johnson, due to broad mistrust after government health officials briefly paused the use of the single-shot for safety reasons, a Washington Post-ABC News survey showed on Monday.

"The nationwide survey shows that slightly fewer than half of US adults overall say they consider the Johnson & Johnson vaccine very or somewhat safe after its use was halted this month following reports of rare, severe blood clots," the Washington Post reported, making public the findings of the poll.

The Post said two other coronavirus vaccines authorized for emergency use in the United States — one developed by Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech and the other by Moderna — elicit significantly greater public confidence. More than 7 in 10 people say they regard each of those two-shot vaccines to be very or somewhat safe, the poll found.

The unwillingness of about 3 in 4 unvaccinated US adults to get the Johnson & Johnson shot points to hurdles facing the Biden administration and state and local public health officials in restarting use of a vaccine that was once heralded for its convenience.

The same Washington Post-ABC News survey, however, found that 64 percent approved of President Joe Biden's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Food and Drug Administration on April 13 temporarily paused the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine after six cases of blood clots in combination with low levels of blood platelets were confirmed in women between the ages of 18 and 48.

The two federal agencies lifted the pause on Friday, although the CDC continued to warn about the increased risk of very rare but severe blood clots. The Washington Post-ABC News survey was carried out before the pause was lifted.

The United States has been worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic since its global outbreak last year, accounting for over 32 million confirmed cases of the virus from a global tally of more than 147 million. A total of more than 572,000 Americans have died from the pandemic, from a worldwide death toll of 3.1 million.

As of April 25, at least 38.9 percent of the American public have received at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 24.6 percent have been fully immunized against the virus.

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Blinken to Make Virtual Trip to Kenya, Nigeria on Tuesday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will make a virtual trip to Kenya and Nigeria on Tuesday for talks with senior leaders on a range of issues including trade and the coronavirus pandemic, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"Blinken will embark tomorrow, April 27, on his first virtual trip to Africa, where he will visit Kenya and Nigeria," Price said in a statement. "During his visit, Secretary Blinken will meet with President [Muhammadu] Buhari and Foreign Minister [Geoffrey] Onyeama to reiterate the value of our bilateral relationship and discuss issues of shared importance."

During his virtual visit to Kenya, Blinken will meet with President Uhuru Kenyatta and Cabinet Secretary Raychelle Omamo to "reaffirm our strategic partnership, discuss future cooperation to promote democracy and expand trade, and explore avenues to address global challenges, including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic," Price added.

Blinken will also virtually visit renewable energy companies in Kenya that serve as "a model of innovative clean energy alternatives in Africa," Price said.

During the visit, Blinken will also highlight a mobile field hospital that the US has donated to Kenya to provide medical supplies for combating COVID-19, Price added.

The trip will kick off on Tuesday with Blinken meeting the participants of Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI), a program aimed at supporting Africa's young leaders, Price said.

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Blinken's Kenya visit will include talks with President Uhuru Kenyatta and Cabinet Secretary Raychelle Omamo, Price said.